CHRISTIAN ONENESS.

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Christian Oneness.

THE SERMON

BEFORE THE

SEVENTY-THIRD ANNUAL CONVENTION

OF THE

PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH

IN

PENNSYLVANIA.

PREACHED IN

ST. LUKE'S CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA,

ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 27th, 1857.

BY THE

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RECTOR OF CHRIST CHURCH, POTTSTOWN, &C.

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Christian Oneness.

ST. JOHN xvii. 20, 21.

Neither pray I for these alone; but for them also which shall believe on me through their word: that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

These are the words of Him who is Head over all things, to the church. They form a part of that solemn supplication which he offered for his chosen apostles, and for all generations of his people. In the three preceding chapters, we have the parting counsels and gracious promises, wherewith he instructed and cheered the disciples but a little while before his passion. In the remainder of St. John's gospel, we find the narrative of his "precious death and burial," his "glorious resurrection and ascension." Between these two distinct portions of the same gospel, occurs the chapter which consists of the Redeemer's prayer. The prayer which is here recorded occupies so prominent a position

in the sacred volume, and is so nearly associated with the closing scenes of our Saviour's earthly life, that it can scarcely fail to suggest to every thoughtful mind the warning word,—"Put thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." But while unfeigned reverence is especially due when we ponder this affecting prayer, yet as it was uttered for our benefit, and written for our instruction, it is meet and right that we should endeavor to ascertain its sacred sense, that so we may understand and embrace the truth it reveals. In this state of mind, and with this intention, let us approach the passage selected for our present meditations. Let us

I. *Seek its plain and literal sense.*

And

II. *Consider the nature of Christian oneness, in its relation to the Christian community at large, and to our own province of Christ's kingdom.*

I. And first, avoiding the refinements of criticism, and all curious speculations, let the passage now before us speak for itself. Thus desirous of catching its simple

and obvious meaning, we see that it is a solemn intercession, in which a certain definite blessing is implored for the apostles, and for all who should believe on the Son of God through their word. As, moreover, our Lord elsewhere, previous to his ascension, promised to be with his appointed delegates to the end of the world, there can be no question that all of every age and of every clime who should receive their message were included in the wide embrace of his intercession.

The inquiry for whom He prayed admitting of but one answer, the subject-matter of the prayer, at least in its general sense, is equally clear. With eyes lifted up to heaven, and with language of majestic simplicity, he prayed that all his followers might be *one*—"As thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they all might be one in us." In the hour of most deep and intimate communion with the Father, he expressed the longing of his soul for the oneness of his ransomed through all time.

His words of divine devotion thus teach the reality, and indicate rather than define the nature, of Christian unity; and at the same time they full clearly intimate that for mankind, separated from God through inward corruption, and alienated from each other through the distracting power of sin, there could be no vital union

with God, and no true concord among men save in the person of himself, the God-man, the one and only Mediator between God and man, who is in the Father, and the Father in him.

II. If, then, the text declares the source and the reality of Christian oneness, what, in the sense of the Redeemer's prayer, and of Scripture generally, is the nature of that oneness?

Viewing it in its harmony with other portions of the word, we may find the true answer. Nor is the response of the lively oracles of God to this inquiry, of double sense or of doubtful import. On the contrary, it is plain to all who, without pride or prejudice, are able to receive it.

And this is the revealed idea of Christian unity. It is oneness of the *inner life* and of *outward relation*.

i. Of the INNER LIFE, Faith and Love are the main elements. Subjective faith, by which we lay hold on the hope set before us, however it may vary in degree, is always and everywhere the same in kind. And if saving faith has an identity of its own, so that God, if not man, can discern it, much more must

he who receives the written revelation acknowledge that the objective faith of the gospel is one and indivisible.

In other words, we cannot do otherwise than regard revealed truth as a symmetrical whole. The divine idea of Christ's religion, present in the infinite mind throughout all eternity past, did not cease to be one when holy men of old spake and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. The faith of the gospel, once for all delivered to the saints, is not at variance with itself; and although we mourn over the disagreement of its avowed confessors, and shrink from the guilt of perverting it, and charitably excuse unwitting ignorance of it, yet is necessity laid upon us to affirm that as there is only one Lord, so there is but one faith.

True Christianity being one and everlastingly the same, it follows that oneness worthy of the name cannot exist where human systems have been allowed to supplant the gospel, nor subsist between those who receive and those who reject the same. But now, lest this view should seem to render agreement impossible, let us never forget that opinions are not articles of faith. Often, alas, through neglect of this distinction, has the unity of the spirit been invaded, and the bond of peace broken.

Oneness of opinion never has prevailed, and, perhaps in this world, never can be expected. The word of God does not require it. Human infirmity will not admit of it. Hence, while we give no place by subjection to any who would infuse the base alloy of earthly error into the fine gold of the sanctuary, we must also avoid making a difference of private sentiment the occasion of unkindly suspicion, or of unseemly strife. Let but the simplicity of the gospel remain, and we may yet cherish the hope that the faith of Christ shall be preserved in its purity and received in its integrity.

And surely, so long as the voice of the mighty past echoes in our sanctuaries whenever we repeat the ancient creeds of Christ's earthly kingdom, we may believe that that which has been shall be, and the long-standing prediction be fulfilled, and the watchmen see eye to eye, and the Redeemer's prayer be answered, the one faith universally prevailing.

ii. Such at least is our expectation and our hope when, in some measure, we realize the harmonizing power of that other main element of the inner life—Christian love. For while, as we know, even love rejoiceth in the truth, its tendency is to knit all together in faith as well as in feeling. And, in the mean time, while differences

exist, it forbids all censorious judgment, and every degree of personal unkindness. Under its mild and peaceful sway, no diversity of conviction will occasion or allow the hostile thought or deed. Teaching us to distinguish between error and its victim, it would have us give no encouragement to untruth, but yet to cherish sincere good will to those even who differ from us the most. Fraternal love, the crowning grace of Christian character, would join mind to mind, and heart to heart. Undermining, or leaping over each middle wall of partition, it would bring together brethren of the same household, and reunite the dissevered family of God. Faith, which is the end of doctrine, is made perfect by love, which is the end of the commandment. Covering the naked form of Truth with the beauty of holiness, infusing into it the energy of divine life, and the attractive power of true affection, Love subdues the gainsayer, not by human logic, but by the wisdom which is from above, and would unite the followers of Christ, not in the way of mere aggregation, but in unity of the spirit and in the bond of peace. Because, therefore, of the known tendency of Christian love to reconcile those who differ, and to bind still more closely those who agree, it is the true import of the Saviour's prayer that we be one in love as well as in the reception of all the Spirit hath

revealed. And thus, to be all of the same mind, and to possess the true sense of brotherhood, is the two-fold oneness of the inner life, which, in the days of his flesh, the Prince of peace besought as the lasting heritage of his church.

iii. But if it was the design of our merciful Lord that his disciples should be one in faith and in love, was it not also his intention that such inward oneness should develop itself outwardly? Or can we for a moment suppose that a rent and distracted Christendom accords with either the letter or the spirit of his prayer?

How fearfully is the Messiah's kingdom divided against itself! We see that the followers of the one Lord have parted asunder in scores of separate organizations, and that, notwithstanding all professions of amity, these different bodies are really quite distinct, each one apparently regarding itself as alone possessing the uncorrupted gospel. We see that while some denominations are avowedly one in faith, and separated on points confessedly non-essential, they yet seem to approach no nearer in actual fellowship than if they agreed only in the less, and differed altogether in matters of greater moment. We see, too, that the

spirit of division which has already produced so many independent bodies, instead of having run its course, is constantly developing new forms of profession. We see that the very principles of ecclesiastical organization which are most generally approved, readily admit of further divisions without limit; and we cannot avoid observing that while upon each occasion of real or supposed variance, there is an irresistible force of mutual repulsion, there seems to be no power at hand to restore harmony, and reunite the disjoined members. Such, as we cannot help seeing it, is the condition of the believing community in this age and in this land.

In view of the facts thus spread around us on every side, it is obvious to remark that they are reconcilable therewith, or else contrary to the idea of the Saviour's prayer. Which is the case we can ascertain in a satisfactory way only by consulting the law and the testimony.

What, then, is the doctrine of Scripture with reference to the external relation which believers should sustain to each other? To what, we ask, is the kingdom of God, in its earthly state, likened. "It is," said the Lord himself, "like a grain of mustard-seed which grew up, and became a great tree." He said, not like unto seeds, but like unto a seed growing out into one organized whole.

Again. The Lord is the vine of which his disciples are the branches, where the symbol indicates a living but yet visible union between Christ and the redeemed, as connected with himself and with each other.

Again. He said "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, that there may be one fold and one shepherd."

If such are the *emblematic* pictures of the word, what are the ordinary *synonyms* for the phrase "Church of God?" Do not the sacred writers constantly use the expressions "body of Christ," "household of faith," "family and kingdom of God," for the less figurative and more familiar title church, or assembly of believers?

And what do such expressions mean? Unless, by a forced interpretation, they are deprived of their inmost sense and richest signification, we must concede that they designate, not merely oneness of sympathy, but also unity of outward relation. Such terms may, indeed, be called figurative; but who can say that they are more so than the word now commonly used to describe the same thing? If the word church, signifying the Lord's house, is a good translation of *ecclesia*, meaning, in its Christian sense, a people called out, is it not reasonable to infer that in all these terms, whatever be their other shades of meaning, there exists the essential idea of unity?

But although to an humble mind, a mere intimation of the Divine will should be amply sufficient, yet in the question before us, we need not rest upon inference alone. Leaving the hidden sense of symbols, and the prominent idea in the synonyms of Scripture, we find words of the plainest and most literal import revealing the same truth.

We know, for instance, what the Master saith of a house or a kingdom divided against itself. And that the literal is the true sense of His most solemn prayer, we may well believe when we listen to the testimony of inspired teachers. If the Lord Jesus prayed that all might be one, his faithful apostle describes all believers as "one body;" into which body, he saith, they are baptized: of which, too, the "one bread" of the Holy Supper is the appointed emblem.

Avoiding, therefore, the abstractions of rationalistic interpretation, let the passages referred to, and others like them, be illustrated by the tenor of *inspired example.*

To that intent, let the fact be duly weighed that the apostles, acting under the explicit instructions of their Lord, constituted but one Christian community. To them the Master gave power to act in his name: to them he spake of the things pertaining to his kingdom: on them, according to express promise, he bestowed the

full dispensation of his Spirit. Holding his sacred commission—qualified by his personal teaching, both before and after the crucifixion, and by the gift of direct inspiration—the course which they pursued in establishing and ruling his kingdom, should be an all-sufficient commentary on the Saviour's words.

And how did they proceed in the fulfilment of their high vocation? As already remarked, under their administration the church of Christ was one communion and fellowship. Parthians and Medes, and converts from the remotest regions, were admitted into one fold. Bond and free were alike at home in the family of God. Nor in the constitution of the church was any allowance made for the mutual prejudice of Jew and Gentile. Of the strength of that prejudice we are all sufficiently informed. If, therefore, mere policy or human infirmity could be alleged as cause sufficient for rending the body of Christ, such allegation might have been made with every show of reason when the gospel was first preached to the seed of Abraham, and to the differing nations of of mankind. The separation of Jewish and Gentile Christians was, we know, from the beginning greatly imminent. In Jerusalem, the Grecian proselytes murmured against the Hebrews. Unauthorized attempts to impose the abrogated rites of the old economy upon Gentile believers made the breach still wider. Distinct

as the two classes were in national peculiarities, and, to some extent in their views of truth and duty, we can readily see that if a denominational Christianity had been allowable, these in all likelihood would have formed the first two separate communions. Instead, however, of yielding to the pressure, the apostles, as the faithful followers of one Lord, with unflinching firmness resisted all attempts to divide the one fold. And to that wise and holy decision, which seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to them, we owe the original union of all sorts and conditions of men in the Christian Church. And thus the first Christian Council set its seal to the principle, that union, and not division, is the normal condition of the flock of God.

In connection with this legislative action of the apostles, elders and brethren, we have an illustration of the same truth under dissimilar circumstances. The evil spirit of discord had entered the Church of Corinth. St. Paul had heard that there were contentions among them. The feeling then rife in that community, and the expression of it assumed a form which, alas, has been often reproduced in these latter days. "Every one saith," so runs the apostle's charge, as though all had been affected by the prevalent fault—"Every one of you saith, I am a Paulite, and I an Apollosite, and I a Cephasite, and I a Christian. Now, I beseech you,

brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." And, then, instead of waiting until contention had produced separation, and while rebuking the very feeling which was tending to division, he boldly proclaimed what he knew to be the law of Christ's kingdom, namely: that there should be no "schism in the body."

In conformity with this law, and in the spirit of the maxim, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism," the great apostle and his fellow-laborers ever acted.

Through the Divine blessing upon such united action, the little one became a thousand, and the small one a strong nation—the Christianity of the one body rapidly extending its limits, until it reached the furthest regions of the then known world.

This view of the doctrine of Scripture, as both by precept and example requiring oneness—oneness of faith, of love, and of external relation—we sincerely believe cannot be evaded without doing violence to the sacred text. In some sense, too, it is universally ackowledged. For what do all the temporary reunions of our day indicate, if not a longing for a union more real and more enduring? What means the familiar picture which represents the confessors of Christ as so

many regiments contending against the common foe, under the one Commander of the people? Such transient reunions and imaginary pictures cannot long satisfy the sacred instincts of the Christian heart. The eyes withholden for a season from the abounding evils of a fragmentary and contentious religion, are beginning to look with saddened apprehensions for the end of these things, and it is plainly seen that the end is not yet. In quarters where once there was no such feeling, there are increasing signs of alarm at the visible effects of disunion, upon the power of the word and the prosperity of Zion. And while the enlightened followers of Christ are looking forward to results already darkly betokened, not a few are learning to look with more and more distaste upon the spectacle of unity professed, but not scripturally practised. It is seen that, notwithstanding all professions of liberality and fraternity, each confession is eager to increase its own numerical strength, by making accessions from others, even though such others be nearest to itself in faith and worship.

In the signs of the times we mark many evidences that this conviction of the unscriptural nature of the prevailing system is steadily deepening, and we believe that it must continue to take a still firmer grasp upon the conscience until it is generally acknowledged that disunion among those who should love as brethren, and

who, in the main, believe the same thing is wrong, contrary to the doctrine of Christ, opposed to the example of apostles, and already condemned by the experience of the Christian world. The Lord make this conviction still more deep and thorough, that so we may be prepared for the "coming of his kingdom, in all the fulness of faith, of love, of unity," and for the doing of "his will on earth, even as it is done in heaven!"

And now, brethren in the ministry and membership of the church which is Catholic for God's truth, and Protestant against human error, may we not briefly view the subject before us in its bearing upon our own position? Assembled here as a Council in the name of the Lord, we need only reverse the previous order of remark to find the application. Thanks be to God for his preventing grace, we meet as the representatives of one communion. In no boastful spirit, but with fervent gratitude to the Author and Finisher of our faith, it may be said, that we possess a govermental system which has proved itself conservative of oneness. With the Lord as our vanguard and rereward, and through his blessing, that system has been safely transmitted to our day. What we have thus inherited from the times of apostles and martyrs, it is our duty and privilege to preserve as the heritage of those

who shall come after us. Upholding this polity from sincere conviction that it has the sanction of holy Scripture and ancient authors, we are to resist all attempts unduly to exalt or depress it.

And while thus, with moderate firmness, we maintain our position, we are also bearing our testimony in favor of what we honestly regard as the safest and best regimen for the Christian community in general—a testimony, the value of which shall be understood when the tribes of the Lord, flowing together, shall desire to adopt means for *preserving* their newly-recovered oneness.

But if, for the ultimate advantage of our fellow Christians, and to our own unspeakable comfort, the Lord has preserved us from the misery and shame of a divided household, are we also one in the maintenance of the faith of God's Word written? We know the facts bearing upon this question. And yet, whatever be our variations of private sentiment, do we not to a man receive the Divine Scriptures as our only rule of faith and duty? Is there a voice that dissents from acknowledging the creeds in their original and the articles in their literal sense, and the homilies, in all the vigor of their Protestant teaching, as our authorized standards of doctrine? Do we not, with one mind, confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, glory in his cross, and depend for life and salvation only on his

forgiving and purifying grace? Without regard to that which is truly of faith, is not the same glorious gospel proclaimed throughout the borders of our Zion? This is our persuasion, and therein do we rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. And if on points, touching the faith as defined, but not of its essence, there be diversity of views, may we not hope that mutual forbearance will make us not less considerate than the church has been liberal and comprehensive?

To this end, be it ours to hold and speak the truth in love. For, alas, so far as the reproach brought against us from without is really deserved—the reproach that we are deficient in unity of spirit—it may be traced to our lamentable want of that love which is the very bond of peace and of all virtue. We want the spirit of true brotherhood, that those who are with us, fellow-servants of the same Lord, may feel themselves to be one with us and we with them; we want larger provision for the ingathering of Christ's poor, that an unbelieving philanthropy may not destroy souls for whom Christ died. We want a more fervent zeal for promoting the present and eternal welfare of the destitute in mind body and estate. And all these wants shall be fully supplied, when, in all our congregations, it may be truly said, "See how these Christians love each other and their fellow-mortals for the Lord's sake!"

FINALLY, we greatly need the banishment from our legislative councils of that spirit from beneath, which is the source of partizan strife, and the abandonment of all internal arrangements, by which that spirit is fostered.

May the merciful Lord fill the hearts of his ministering servants with love of the brethren, and help all such as are to be admitted into any holy function, to remember that whosoever "dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God and God in him"! May He enable both pastors and people to realize how dependent is the final triumph of the cross upon oneness among those who are enlisted under that holy standard, to contend, not against each other, but against the "Kingdom of sin, Satan and death"!

And so, unceasingly let the prayer go up from every heart, that "all may be one," that the world may believe on the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He hath sent. Amen.